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# *The late snow show*

Austria's highest resorts promise a thrilling end to the ski season, says  
**ARNIE WILSON**

**O**BERGURGL is the highest parish in Austria. It owes its fame to a dramatic incident 80 years ago, when two scientists in a revolutionary pressurised balloon came close to disaster.

Soaring high above the Wildspitze — Austria's second-highest peak — Professor Auguste Piccard wrote in his log: '5.50pm: We have only oxygen for four hours left in our balloon gas cylinder.'

But Piccard and his assistant Paul Kipfer emerged unscathed after an impromptu landing on the Gurgler Ferner glacier, near the sleepy hamlet of Obergurgl.

News of Piccard's rescue spread quickly. And although there'd been a ski club at Obergurgl since 1911, the area suddenly became famous worldwide. Within three years, Walter Ingham, founder of the Inghams tour operation, was bringing his first party of skiers to the Oetz Valley, after placing an advertisement in a national newspaper, saying: 'Private Party to Ski the Tyrol — 14 days for 12 guineas.'

The resort lies at the end of the Oetz Valley, a 40-mile long gash separating the Otztal Alps from the Stubai Alps, that branches off from the A12 motorway, 31 miles from Innsbruck.

Some six miles into the valley, Oetz itself has a delightful bijou ski resort of its own. But the 'real' skiing starts almost 20 miles further up at Sölden. Then it's another ten miles before you finally reach Obergurgl.

What awaits is 68 miles of piste, so high that good, natural snow is virtu-

ally guaranteed well into April, with wall-to-wall snowmaking on standby.

All the runs are above the tree-line, and most are satisfyingly steep enough to keep intermediates and even advanced skiers and daredevil snowboarders happy. There's plenty for beginners, too. At this altitude, with skiing up to 10,100 ft, things can get draughty in the depths of winter, but there are plenty of mountain restaurants where you can sneak an early hot chocolate with rum. At the Downhill Grill, at the bottom of the Hochgurglgondola, the menu suggests: 'If you like, you can grill yourself.'

Likewise, if you manage the legendary bump run down from the Hohe Mut Alm (a restaurant with a sun terrace and a panoramic view of 21 peaks with altitudes of around 10,000 ft) to the Nederhütte (it promises to 'rock you to the limit' with live music from 4pm four days a week), you can bop to the colourfully named resident band, the Nederlumpen, and dance on the tables with impunity, encouraged by owner Rudi Gamper.

Thoughtfully, he also provides snowmobile transportation back to Obergurgl for skiers who've overdone the schnapps, even though the place has erected floodlights to help you find your way home.

For lively apres-ski, seek out Sölden, a 15-minute taxi ride away. It's one of the most vibrant party towns in the Austrian Alps. Although Inghams no longer has Sölden in its brochure, its local rep will organise a day's visit and an Obergurgl lift pass covers it, too.

Obergurgl may not have the glitz and glamour of some other Austrian



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favourites such as St Anton or Kitzbuhel, but it offers good value and almost guaranteed snow — and late bargains.

Steal a week later this month or in April and you'll see why Piccard and Kipfer were so relieved to fetch up here.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

SEVEN nights' half board at the Crystal Hotel start from £845pp, including flights from Gatwick to Innsbruck and transfers. Inghams (020 8780 4447, [ingham.co.uk](http://ingham.co.uk)). For further information, visit [oetzta.com](http://oetzta.com).



The season's drawing to a close, but conditions are looking good

## SNOW PATROL

THERE'S happy news for late-season skiers. Piste conditions are good to excellent almost everywhere, so book now; there are plenty of bargain holidays in March and April. At the moment, it's sunny and bitterly cold in most European resorts.

#### FRANCE

VAL D'ISERE and Tignes are skiing exceptionally well, along with Meribel and Courchevel. They all need more snow, but pistes are beautifully groomed.

The further south, the better the snow. Alpe d'Huez, Les Deux Alpes and Serre Chevalier are having a

good winter, while Isola 2000 is exceptional. Saint Lary in the Pyrenees is looking good.

#### AUSTRIA

CONDITIONS are best in the west; in St Anton and the Eastern Tirol. Obergurgl has 75cm in the village and 195cm on top, making it an ideal resort for a late-season visit.

#### SWITZERLAND

CENTRAL and Eastern Switzerland have the best of it. Cover has been light in the west, but Verbier had 20cm of recent fresh snow and has respectable depths of 10-210cm.

#### ITALY

THE whole country has enjoyed a good winter to date. Canazei in the Dolomites has 35cm in town and 145cm on top. In the Aosta Valley, Cervinia is skiing particularly well.

#### NORTH AMERICA

RESORTS in Utah and Colorado are set to break snow cover records in a vintage winter.

Canada, too, is skiing at its very best. Whistler has a snowpack 3m deep at mid-mountain and Lake Louise 164cm.

■ **INFORMATION** provided by [welove2ski.com](http://welove2ski.com)



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**UTAH**  
LIFE ELEVATED



High life: Obergurgl is virtually snow-sure and excellent value